Book Review

The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities. Carl Abbott, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1981. 317 pages. $19.95 cloth, $9.95 paper.

In the second half of the seventies, national publications developed the concept of an increasingly significant and distinct region termed the "sunbelt." Using various geographical definitions, writers have discussed the Sunbelt's culture, politics, and rapid growth, usually in contrast to the relative decline in the formerly dominant North and industrial heartland. These discussions have focused on national issues, including sectional conflicts over federal resources, and changes in national political and cultural trends instigated by newly influential Sunbelt vanguards. The aggressive rising of the South into the consciousness of the nation has occasioned tomes of descriptive and speculative analysis in a variety of disciplines..."Southern fried chic," as one long-time student of the region describes it.

In The New Urban America, Carl Abbott examines the physical and political development of rapidly growing middle-size and major cities in the Sunbelt. He defines the Sunbelt as "a pair of regions oriented toward the southeastern and southwestern corners of the United States that have shared similarities of economic development and demographic change since the 1940s." He first describes these similarities in the context of regional shifts in national growth, a fairly standard and predictable, though proficient, treatment of trends now well established. The main issues of the book then emerge: how has the experience of rapid population growth in Sunbelt cities affected their local politics? And, what are the added implications of changing patterns of land use and development within metropolitan areas? Here Abbott's work is much more provocative and the strengths of his arguments pull the earlier descriptions into context.

In setting the stage for discussion, Carl Abbott compares the growth patterns of Sunbelt cities since World War II. The numbers reveal the importance of whether Abbott's five representative middle-size cities developed as "regional markets," "service centers," or "military centers." The representative cities--Atlanta, Denver, Portland, San Antonio, and Norfolk--range in population from 1.4 million (Atlanta) to Norfolk's 681,000. Though their growth in the last three decades has sometimes been explosive--especially in the science-based white-collar economy of Denver and the South's services and trade center, Atlanta--the rates of growth are in the middle range for the Sunbelt. Within the nation, it is wealthier Western cities that deviate most from the North in the socio-economic characteristics of their residents, because southern cities are tied to relatively poor hinterlands.

Turning to an explanation of the interactions of growth, land use, and politics, Abbott finds that comparable patterns of "social geography" were developed by the elected officials and bureaucrats of city after city in the last four decades. Beginning with local responses to the national mobilization for World War II, with its massive migrations of people to each of the five cities, he describes in colorful terms the boom-town challenge to prewar city leaders to "think fast and act big." Surprisingly, the desperate strains on resources for housing, transportation, and other urban facilities did not convince the city governments of the need to expand. The city leaders acknowledged the huge pressures this rapid wartime growth produced but, looking to the past, their fears of another postwar depression constrained the scope of their actions. Confronted with increasing demands for services and advised to lead local government into a more active and comprehensive role, the city officials responded with "adamant inaction."

When the war ended, and a cold war economy presented not depression, but unanticipated and unprecedented opportunities for expanded growth, a new political movement developed in the Sunbelt cities. Efforts led by active and formalized contingents of local and corporate businessmen dragged reluctant city governments kicking and screaming into a new era of large-scale master plans and public works financed by bonds. The business leaders unabashedly presented large public works projects and plans as tools for economic growth. Not wartime services for a new

population influx, but the transition to a growth economy justified the cities' large investments in public works and facilities, and in the planning functions that rationalized them. The growth-oriented businessmen and professional bureaucrats of the "good government" teams worked through the late forties and fifties to oust the more conservative city hall "cronies." They built cities on a scale to match their exuberant boosterism, developing suburbs they hoped would strengthen the city's growth. However, Abbott shows that in the sixties the suburbs began to challenge downtown economic advantage, since the suburbs by then harbored most of the powerful and wealthy. As a defense, city business leaders employed urban renewal.

"In the urban renewal alliance, it was impossible to separate public and private interests, to untangle private real estate booms and surges of public construction, and to differentiate between the goals of bureaucrats and businessmen," Abbott declares. Most cities' downtown redevelopment efforts began with a few false starts. The specter of federal involvement led one Richmond newspaper to speculate that the city was inviting the "shadow of Marx." However, in 1954 the irresistable lure of profitability was introduced. Congress authorized funds for non-residential redevelopment. Then investors and businessmen busily and successfully mobilized bond drives and built downtown redevelopment projects. Although other interest groups occasionally negotiated for projects peripheral to the grand plan of the boosters, such as housing, this opposition did not hinder the urban renewal leaders.

The urban renewal projects of the sixties exemplified the nearly exclusive power of the business interest groups to define the issues and projects of Sunbelt city governments. In the 1950s these same business progressives had used grand scale metropolitan planning, developing and annexation to spur growth. While the leaders of "glamour" cities exhibited "a tendency to focus civic pride on a pharaonic scale" in downtown redevelopment, they overlooked basic services for less affluent city dwellers. By the end of the sixties, enough wealthy and influential citizens had moved to the suburbs to build a base for their own better services. Now the suburbs were no longer dominated by city agendas. Governmentally, economically, and socially, the suburbanites defined themselves as self-sustained. Thus the growing independence of Sunbelt suburbs during the late sixties and seventies generated a new stage in urban politics. Within the less prosperous cities, neighborhoods and other groups began to organize around local concerns and services and to compete for scarce resources. The pursuits and concerns of the business boosters and their families were fragmented by their dispersal into suburban communities. Abbott calls this stage of the cities' political development "metropolitan pluralism."

In accounts of confrontations between residents of suburbs and city neighborhoods over basic support services, Abbott shows that the consensus of the "businessman administrations" on issues of growth and allocation has been shattered. Specific and localized interest groups now effectively challenge the concept of public interest that turns out to serve particular business interests.

Abbott concludes with the prediction that the Sunbelt cities fitting his model have exhausted strategies used by the proponents of "growth under unified direction." Now the old integrative strategies are giving way to fragmentation. Abbott raises the hope that "stranded" cities and suburbs, facing many of the same problems, may find common cause.

Abbott's goal is to develop a better understanding of the spatial dynamics of suburbanization in Sunbelt city politics since World War II. Because these cities in the South and West are growing so rapidly, he contends that their patterns and innovations in government and decision-making will influence the future agenda and terms for urban politics throughout America. He successfully presents his thesis by synthesizing a broad variety of research sources into individual city histories. The New Urban America makes a solid contribution to an analysis of Sunbelt city politics, yet one that raises many questions of interpretation.

The book's focus on the impacts of suburbanization on city politics tends to leave out of the picture some corollary considerations. Abbott mentions race, class, and economic theories, but does not suggest their influence, their explanatory power, in his conclusions. Abbott is optimistic that, especially in times of crisis and scarcity, diverse groups in cities can structure new means of equitably allocating resources, which the business-dominated leadership of the past failed to do. He does not question whether business progressives may be losing their hometown perogative not to fragmented groups of other residents, but to ever-expanding corporate and conglomerate power holders. If the destinies of cities in the growing Sunbelt is to be more firmly controlled by these much more concentrated investment decisions, how can the local alliances that Abbott hopes to see protect the health of the cities?

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